DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 385 790 CG 026 294

AUTHOR Yazak, Sharon; And Others
TITLE Transition and Self-Advocacy: Experiences and Perspectives.
PUB DATE Oct 94
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Special Programs in Region Eight (18th, Billings, MT, October 22-25, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Assertiveness; *Career Choice; *Career Counseling; Career Development; *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; Postsecondary Education; *Special Needs Students; *Transitional Programs
IDENTIFIERS *School to Work Transition; *Self Advocacy

ABSTRACT

An overview of academic matriculation with an emphasis on specific skills, concepts, and applications that can be used to develop an appreciation of success in higher education is presented. By defining the student as the center of planning, techniques are provided to translate ideas and abstract thought to real-world applications. Recommendations for transition and self-advocacy give individuals a framework for developing a map that, as clearly as is possible for the individual, can be used to measure changes in the process of transition. Proven techniques for survival in higher education are presented. (Author/JE)

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Running head: TRANSITION AND SELF-ADVOCACY

Transition and Self-Advocacy: Experiences and Perspectives

A Presentation to the Association of Special Programs in Region Eight

18th Annual Conference

Billings, Montana

October 22-25, 1994

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CG026294

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Abstract

An overview of academic matriculation with an emphasis on specific skills, concepts, and applications that can be used to develop an appreciation of success in higher education is presented. By defining the student as the center of planning, techniques are provided to translate ideas and abstract thought to real-world applications. Recommendations for transition and self-advocacy give individuals a framework for developing a map that, as clearly as is possible for the individual, can be used to measure changes in the process of transition. Proven techniques for survival in higher education are presented from the perspective of the faculty. Enough humor is injected to make the session memorable as well as useful.

Transition and Self-Advocacy: Experiences and Perspectives

Introduction

(Prior to seating, packets of materials were placed on the chairs of the participants. Red, blue, and greens dots were placed on the packets to correspond with the statistical facts noted below. Participants were asked to involve themselves in the situation of the individual with a disability considering the statistical review.) I am going to provide you with a simple statistic to illustrate why we believe transition planning is important for people with disabilities. All of you who have red dots on your packets please sit down. This says that 67% of people with disabilities according to the latest Harris polls are unemployed. Now all of you with blue dots sit down. Of those who are left, 75% of those employed are underemployed. Now the people with green dots. People with green dots represent people with disabilities who are appropriately employed.

Transition, Self-Advocacy, and Empowerment

I want to talk a little bit about some aspects of transition and self advocacy and empowerment of students that I think are very important issues for us to be discussing that maybe will give a little bit of background to what Sharon Yazak and Dan Yazak will be talking about. What I mostly want to talk about is a central theme of my section of this--is how critically important it is to help young people develop some kind of vision of success for themselves when they are out of school. It will help them make decisions before they leave school as to what it is they are seeking. Now, after saying that, I know fully well that most people as adolescents don't

have a fully developed vision of success and haven't considered their life long work. But I think it is still critically important.

Let me give you a personal example. I was in New Mexico last Saturday night and I had an opportunity to hear Gordon Lightfoot play. I took my seven year old son and he and I went to hear Gordon Lightfoot play some of his golden hits, his same base and guitar play for the last 21 years-still playing the same stuff. I was thinking back to when about a quarter of a century ago I was a sophomore in high school and I was listening to Gordon Lightfoot's music-some of the same stuff he played Saturday night. At that time I was a real skilled electric base player. I liked playing music, particularly Gordon Lightfoot's music. My vision of success was to be like the base player in Gordon Lightfoot's band. I wanted to be (not him literally) but have his abilities and be able to do that type of music and make those types of sounds and be able to influence people with music. Now that vision of success didn't pan out. I had an opportunity to try and failed. But I think there was some elements in my vision of success that did contribute to what I ultimately did want to do. It does still involve interacting with people, getting up and being the center of attention every now and then. So I think there is a core element. What I want to talk about is how we help young people with disabilities develop that kind of vision of success.

Let me give you another musical quote from Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. I remember when I was coming back from a discussion on transition and we had gotten into the technicalities of transition planning for students with disabilities. We were talking about different plan formats. Somehow the discussion had missed the core concepts from what I believed transition was about. I was driving along and pondering this over on my way home. Graham Nash came up on the radio singing this song on the

way home. I heard it many times. He said the right point, what this is about. Helping to try to figure out what someone's dreams are so we can build on those things. Trying to help someone wants and envision when they leave school.

I am going to offer a number of considerations to that end I think will maybe clarify what I am trying to say and summarize what experiences I've had in trying to help those young people make decisions. How many of you knew what you wanted to do with clarity when you left high school? A couple of folks. How many of you had a vague idea of what you wanted to do? How many of you had absolutely no idea what you wanted to do when you left high school? I was kind of one of those people. I wanted to become the base player, but I wanted to go to college. So why did I go to college?--I have absolutely no idea. That was the next thing I was suppose to do. Part of what I am trying to say is that if we can help clarify that vision right away I think we will be helping youngsters.

What I am going to offer for you is some considerations for you to keep in mind to help young people clarify their vision of success. A term I am using quite loosely but a term meaning their ability to project and say that's why I'm doing what I'm doing, that's what I want to be doing next, and that's why I'm doing what I'm doing today, moving towards that next step.

I think the first consideration comes from someone I respect a great deal. I haven't met her. Her name is Edna Szymanski and she is a professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. She is very skilled in the area of transition. She is a certified rehab counselor, a special educator, someone who know a great deal about this area. She has written texts and articles about transition and is very influential in this area. In

January in a journal called Exceptional Children she wrote an article called Life Span and Life Space-Considerations for Transition. Part of her thought, the longitudinal part of the life span part of it. She made a comment. She said despite the fact that we now have legislation in the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act or IDEA. Despite the fact that we now have amendments to that law that say that all special education students need to have a transition goal as part of their IEP-individualized education program. That really may not make a difference because if you wait until just before they graduate it is becoming too late for people to make decisions about their life. She said even if you wait until the law mandates when this must occur--no later than the age of 16--that we are already too late. She made a great point and said that if we can start early with longitudinal planning over the course of someone's education they will be in that much better position to make the decisions when they make the time of real transition from school to adulthood or school to post secondary education. One of the things that really struck me that she said, we don't talk about much but one of the things she would encourage is to allow kids to do as what she calls "career fantasizing". The idea of starting early, pretending you're someone and relying on that goal, so that you can see what it feels like. You watch very young children do alot of career fantasizing and again encourage that with kids with disabilities sometimes, so they reach this point and now we're asking these profound questions like, "what do want to do with your life?". And they've never even thought about it. So, the idea of starting early and encouraging people to think about rules and try it on. I'll give you a quick example that I heard in New York City from a very talented, young teacher, a guy named Curt Word. He's not famous for anything, but he's famous with me, because of

this one example. He teaches youngsters that have learning disabilities, five and ten year old kids and he said , now I want to teach some things so they understand more about the world as life, so they can make decisions. And he said, for instance, I teach a lesson in my class where I string string from one corner to the other corner and we hang airplanes on it. We do things sort of to indicate transportation that comes into the city. We also have a truck route on the outside of the classroom. We also set up a garbage district over here. We've got other areas over here, the market, the financial markets and so forth and while the kids are playing and doing stuff with these things they are learning about the inner connectedness of professions. He said, if I can teach them those issues so that when they leave my classroom and they look around themselves in New York City and see all of these different conflicts and things going on and they can see that they connect somehow and that people work for a reason. Maybe they'll start to develop a clearer sense of what they want to do in relation to what others want to do . I thought that was real creative . A nice idea for starting early. So my first consideration, is let's start with this stuff early lets not wait until just before they've graduated from school.

The second issue is very important . I've spent a great deal of my career working with people with very severe disabilities, severe cognitive disabilities, many who don't go on to post secondary education but go into supported employment and others forms of productive activity. One of the things we've found, in people with severe disabilities, is that we often haven't taught them to make meaningful choices. The choices have been made for them, what you wear, who you associate with, what you eat, things of that nature. Suddenly we reach this transition age and we are asking them to make decisions about where they want to live, whether they

want to go to school, where they want to work. Very profound decisions that are taught for any kid. So I guess one of the things I want to emphasize is if we want to help the people longitudinally again learn to make choices in their life it will help them to make more informed choices to be able to tell who they are in relation to an interest in post secondary education.

Third issue, that is critically important. We are finding this more and more with young people is to help them to conduct planning and participate in planning in an atmosphere that is comfortable for them. The law I mentioned, IDEA act, says very specifically that not only families should be to be part of the transition planning discussions but young people themselves should be in those discussions. They should participate in their own planning. How that all gets played out unfortunately, in the real world, is we ask young people and say, we are going to have planning meeting about your life. There will be a number of people there-your teacher, your parents, the school administrators, people from Vocational Rehabilitation, maybe some people from the local college. How would you like to come to that meeting? Like any self respecting 16 year old, many people say, I think I'll pass. Then we let them pass and we make decisions for them. Part of what I think we are trying to do in the area of transition is to say that is really unacceptable. We need to get the people there, it is their right. We provide a place and a time that is comfortable. If we need to make major life decisions what are some of the atmospheres or locations that you are most comfortable having discussions about those decisions?

I just want to give you a quick sample of some of the places or settings you would feel most comfortable for transition planning. Home, in private. Who do you like to have involved in making those decisions? Someone who is on your side, someone you know or trust, people you care about and have

information about you. Part of the point I am trying to make is that asking people to come into a meeting with a bunch of people with coats and ties and looking very formal is intimidating for families and extremely intimidating for young people. So part of what I am saying is if we can conduct planning in an environment and time with people that will let that student relax more I think we get more at the heart of what they want. They will be able to tell more what they want. Part of what we are talking about here is to allow students to be able to say what it is they want out of life, why they are going on to a post secondary education, and what it is they need to succeed there. If they are reluctant to speak up we are unlikely to get that information. There is a whole series of planning strategies that I will not go into today just because of our time limitations but there is a number of alternative planning strategies that have emerged really from the world of even severe disabilities, who can not even speak for themselves, that allow people to do planning in their homes, in their living rooms, at times when they are most comfortable. I think those strategies are most universal. We need to be creative in thinking of ways to make people most comfortable and to talk about this stuff over time in an atmosphere were they are free to talk about it we will get more information.

Part of that notion about making the kids comfortable is allowing and encouraging them to invite people that they trust. People who are near and dear to them to help them make decisions in an appropriate way. That not only is family members but may well include peers and others in school. It is an important issue. I will give you a very quick example of that. A young person I met in his 21st year, about to graduate from special education services, was very unclear about what direction he was going to take. In his case he was going on to a job, but he wasn't sure where or how and

what he should do. He did a very interesting thing, he sent out a questionnaire to all the people in his life who cared about him. He asked questions like who do you think I am, what do you think I am good at, what kind of thing do you think I should do when I graduate from school? All these people sent back their responses. When they first had a transition planning meeting for him that year he had all this wealth and information from other people. I thought that was a great strategy. My only comment was that if he would have started that when he was twelve, thirteen, fourteen he would have been at a better position to make decisions.

Five other quick considerations from my perspective for kids before they leave school. Encourage them to explore and to gain experience related to their dream. If they want to try something that they can support to that, let them try it while they are in school, somehow build it into their curriculum. There is many creative ways, we can find ways for creative ways to apply for young people to experience things while they are in school as part of their curriculum. I think that is important. For the people that I have spent the most of my time with that means letting them have real, paid work experience before they leave school. Also, they make decisions which is an important aspect. I have spent a lot of time with planning meetings where we have what I call profiles. In other words, a picture of who someone is, a description. Unfortunately, too often those profiles focus on what people can't do well. And there's one aspect I think we should build on is from the aspect of self advocacy and empowerment to the students, encouraging them to develop a picture, a profile of who they are in a way that builds their strengths. Not just talk about what they can't do well because many of the students we're talking about have learning

disabilities, have difficulties in organizing their time and a number of things.

Let's talk about what they do well so that they can use that information to advocate for themselves. I remember a young man with fairly severe learning disabilities. His last year of high school I met him for the first time, he was developing his resume and he didn't talk about what he wasn't good at. He talked about all the things he was very good at . And very clear he said "I'm going to be involved in working on a cruise ship and I've got all this experience pointing that way and I know I'm going to do it" because he had that profile to build on. I think we need to provide students with accurate information about the next environments they're going to . Related to that I think we need to help connect them with people that know aspects of things. If I were working with a youngster in a high school, connecting them to someone like Sharon Yazak to learn about what goes on at MSU-Billings could be a critically important aspect I could do. I guess the last thing maybe is I feel bad because I've noticed your dreaming not to discourage you people from dreams. I think we should be in the business of not just telling people no you can't do that in a summary way, but instead of saying the adventure of aspiration, let's encourage that, but let's keep the new information built upon the new direction. So, I am going to end where I began, but just to say that I think what we'll be doing is powering students to make a transition, to help them division develop a strong and consistent division of where they are going. If they can do that, they'll build a profile of themselves, I think, that will help them along.

Recommendations for Transition and Self-Advocacy

The truth of the matter is what Dan is talking about is just now starting to happen in an area that I'd like to characterize as career education planning for students with disabilities in a postsecondary setting.

Disability Support Services at Montana State University-Billings has a plan similar to Dan Steere's so that people with disabilities in a postsecondary setting have access to career planning. Career planning is needed because many university students with disabilities haven't had a job or other similar experiences which allow people to gain the confidence and experience to transition to successful careers. With this in mind, I would like to talk about what I call a "Career Education Plan".

When students are in their freshman or sophomore year, they are told to choose a major, a process that may be difficult for students if they have little self-knowledge; if they are overwhelmed with new information; and if they are unfamiliar with school requirements. In order to facilitate this process, incoming students at Montana State University-Billings are required to have mandatory advising.

Students with disabilities have additional adjustments. For instance, because many of them need academic accommodations, they are required to learn to self-advocate, a procedure they may not have experienced in the past. Self advocacy is a skill, and as a skill, it can be taught. Many students know that they have a disability, but they really cannot say how it affects them. As a result, they need to practice stating that they have a disability, what accommodation(s) they need that will help them to succeed. Successful self-advocacy includes being assertive, effectively communicating needs, understanding what accommodations are required, understanding why they are required, and believing in self. When students

gain confidence in self-advocacy through training and practice negotiating with instructors, their experience will carry over to the workplace and into their life.

Students need to know that accommodations are not necessarily costly: according to the Job Accommodation Network, 31% of accommodations cost little or nothing; 19% of accommodations cost $1-$50; 19% of accommodations cost $51-$500; 11% cost from $501$1,000; and 1% cost $5,000 and up (as cited in Wille, 1993). In the classroom, for instance, a simple hand-held magnifier may enlarge text for a student with low vision.

An additional adjustment for students with disabilities in a postsecondary setting is the need to be trained to use technology, knowledge which may allow them to be more successful at school and at work. Students will be exposed to technology at the University, ranging from Apple computers to Zoomtext, software that enlarges screen text.

Students who have learning disabilities, head injuries, or who have other cognitive processing problems, may need to be taught learning strategies to help them to be more successful in the classroom. Many students are unaware of the need to study more efficiently until they are faced with an overwhelming reading load. Training in learning strategies will help them to succeed. It is interesting that in the last fifteen years, the percent of freshman who report having a disability has tripled, and the disabilities most prevalent among college students are invisible. The percentage of students with learning disabilities has grown the most rapidly, and now constitutes 25% of all students with disabilities (Wille, 1993). The statistics for students with disabilities at Montana State University-Billings corroborate these findings: of 150 students registered

with Disabilities Support Services, approximately 33% have learning disabilities.

As students move into their sophomore year, the Career Education Plan continues as students explore career goals in more depth. They have had experience with different classes and have a better grasp of University life; they are beginning to be more familiar with their strengths and weaknesses.

When students request Disability Support Services, part of the intake interview includes questions about career goals and short-term goals, for instance "What do you hope to accomplish this semester? How is this related to your career goal?", or "What traits and skills are you acquiring right now, this year, which will help you to get your dream job?". They are encouraged to describe their dream job, considering aspects such as whether they prefer to work inside or outside, alone or with others, or if they would like regular hours or flex time.

Sophomore year would also be a time to explore career interests, abilities and values and to have continuing workshops addressing questions such as, "What allows you to keep a job?" to encourage development of interacting with others, telephone skills, the importance of being on time and other job maintenance skills.

By the time the student has moved into the junior and senior years, the Career Education Plan includes experience in practicums and internships in some majors, and the opportunity to partake in cooperative education. Career Services Training involves workshops concerning dressing for success; hygiene issues, if needed; resume and cover letter preparation; and interviewing techniques. In preparing for a job interview, students with disabilities are faced with the dilemma of whether and/or

when to disclose the presence of an invisible disability. In addition, they need to know what questions are legal for an employer to ask and how to handle answering the questions when they are asked. Employers cannot ask "Do you have a disability", for example, but they can ask "Are you able to move 50 pounds from point A to point B?" Students need to know the essential functions of the job for which they are applying, and to be prepared to answer questions related to essential functions. For instance, it is legal to ask, "Can you fulfill the essential function of the job with or without a reasonable accommodation?"

With the integration of a cohesive Career Employment Plan throughout the four years of academic life, the student with a disability will be incorporating self-advocacy skills and will have received the necessary information to assure a smoother transition to the employment setting. They will be prepared for the job fairs, with resume and skills in hand.

Transition and Self-Advocacy for the Higher Education Classroom

Dan Steere and I are particularly interested in this concept of what happens in transition. What I would like you to do with your cards, no names please, or any other identifying information, on one side before I am done, could you do me a favor and jot down the best example that you've run into concerning transition from high school in addition to higher education what worked best. The very best thing you've seen or heard of, then on the other side the worst thing you've ever heard of or saw happen. If you would jot that down and then I'll pick those up. We're interested in this continuing research in what you folks are seeing that works well and what doesn't work well. So, if you could just do me a favor and take some time to jot that down.

I want to talk a little about transition from the perspective of a member of a teaching faculty. And reinforce, perhaps, something that you've seen before, taking a slightly different perspective. It never ceases to amaze students that when they get to higher education what happens to them at this point in time is different than anything they've seen before. Part of that transition is, quite frankly, they don't know what to do. Now this may sound simplistic, but, it's incredibly important for all of us to either encourage faculty or encourage helping professionals, to reinforce students. I have a few guidelines to present, you could certainly add a lot more to those. Those are in your packet. I'll just take a couple of minutes and go over them with you.

Focus Area: Get and Stay Involved

Be responsible and active. There is no other avenue to success. Students for many good or bad reasons find themselves coming from areas where they can be responsive or active. Know your hot buttons. Push them regularly at a minimum of every class period for the first two weeks. Let me show you what I mean. Students that are having particular difficulty with transition, I think, can write this down on a 3 x 5 card, and keep it in a textbook. And every time, before class starts, they take this 3 x 5 card out, and they say , "What am I doing here? Why have I chosen to be sitting here now? Is there some better place I could be? What does my presence here mean to me?" Treat it as a dream. Treat it as a vision. Treat it as fantasizing about why I want to be in school, and reinforce that feeling. If their answering this question "What am I doing here? I don't know. Why have I chosen to be sitting here now? Because Jay made me show up today. Could I be somewhere? Yeah, I'd rather be drinking beer and going out to the lake. What does my presence here mean to me? Not much, I'm just

collecting some money." If that's where they are with their dreaming and their fantasizing, their decision making, that may be fine with them, but what you've got to share with them is that may be fine with them for now, but they won't stay in higher education very long. And if your dream fulfilled really is of being in higher education and staying on this academic track, you need to rethink some answers for these. And if you don't want to rethink the answers, again, that's okay. That's a choice that you're going to make, but there is going to be some consequences. And, three weeks later you are going to come back to the person that is advising you and say, "Gee, I've never got a D on a test before in my life. What's wrong?" Well, pull out the 3 x 5 card and go through those questions. There is nothing wrong with drinking beer at the lake but not when you should be at school It's just a little tricky, if you haven't tried that before you might want to do it. First two weeks make sure they're asking themselves these questions constantly. Those are some hot button that have to be pushed.

Ask Questions: There is No Extra Charge

If you have a question ask, if you don't have a question make one up but make it appropriate. I can't think of a better way to get people involved in classroom activity then asking questions. Students understand some of the things as far as dreaming and understanding where they want to go they have an important part to play.

Where Your Body Is: Your Mind Will Follow

Number five, do not park your body and mind at the back of the room. Unless the fact is that for some reason that class seating is alphabetized for everyone and you happen to be at the end of the alphabet. The worst thing you can do is because of a mindset is to give them the back of the room. Front row, well, maybe not, second or third row possibly.

Engage Completely

Have you ever stayed engaged in a TV program without watching the TV? Somehow we do something well but we are always watching. It doesn't have to be constant eye contact with the TV set but every now and then we glance that way, try to participate in what's going on. And if you are at the back of the room guess what you'll probably be doing. Your not looking at your 3x5 card and asking yourself good questions. Avoid the "what is going on experience" especially when taking notes. After a test I'll have a student come in and say "You know I knew that you were going to ask that question. I knew it was going to be about twenty-five percent of the test yet when I wrote it down when we were talking about it in class this is what I've got ." So I take their notes and I say "that's a good job of taking down what we've talked about in class." I give them back to them and say "tell me what it says." In your own words tell me what you think it says, what does it mean to you. How are you going to apply that , connect that with anything? Well, now I don't know what is going on. Why didn't you raise your hand? Well, I was embarrassed. I didn't want to.

This May Not Be Interesting-It Must Get Better

We are going to get into some techniques on how to better stay interested. Often, you're sure that you've lost interest. If the English course you're taking is the most boring thing you can imagine and the test book author is really awful and you've had it, okay, fake it. Get your card out convince yourself if nothing else you've got to get out of this place and get a job and college English is something your going to have to pass. Take it from short term to long term, I don't care. You've lost interest, fake it . If silence is golden, recitation is platinum. You have to participate actively in the classroom everyday. Cram is a four letter word. Like a lot of other

four letter words. I think that is a bad one. Okay and finally, begin "not doing it" right now. Tell people this is the way they think, that they've got to begin "not doing it" right now. Whatever they were doing they were wrong, begin "not doing it". Now, not at the end of the semester.

Let me close with some coping skills. The literature tells us and some references are on the back that you can use if you wish to do some more work with this. The literature tells us that most students in an academic environment, particularly higher education, don't fail because of academic reasons. There are a lot of other reasons why people fail in school. If you are not doing this already, just these 3 little pieces will add some support for coping skills for non academic work. When Sharon read that list of what MSU-Billings is doing -a lot of those didn't sound like traditional academic skills, but a lot of them did.

What I want you to do on your way home, when you get in your car, I want you to sit there before you put the key in the ignition and imagine that the steering wheel is on the right side instead of the left. Imagine that the stick shift will be shifted with the left hand. Imagine that the brake, clutch, and accelerator are in different positions. Imagine that's what will happen to you when you sit in your car. Think about it now and when you sit in your car I want you to think about it again. How easy is it going to be for you to get home by backing out of the parking lot and turn into how difficult is that going to be compared with what you can usually do.

Most of us are going to encounter some difficulty with that and most of the difficulty isn't our ability to do hand eye coordination. We do that pretty well. How we think through the changes of our abilities cognitive if that may be the applications. Guess what happens when people transition into higher education? All the supports, all the consistent behaviors, all the

reality base all the way through now have changed. And we've said you're in a whole different environment and unless all of us are going to spend some time initiating coping skills in a nonacademic level with those folks in that transition, these numbers that we see of 50, 60, 70 percent of people not graduating are going to stay there. They don't graduate for academic reasons, they don't graduate because of things in the transition.

The right handed steering car with the goofy shifter is an example of a transition problem. It is a very different environment. Students need information and support. They need problem solving skills and they need to identify alternative works. Let me tell you what happens to individuals who come into higher education without any basis of support , don't have the kind of information bases they used to have, and they're looking to do what? Be rewarded, to succeed. Let's say we change all their social props, change all the cultural pieces, all the things they are used to seeing and put them in a class with fifty people in English composition and they get an F on their first three papers. How rewarded are they? Not at all. Most of us don't have a whole lot of control over what happens in the classroom so, where do we reward? Hopefully, then, where we have is some control.

These alternative pieces of control include everything from living in the dorm to how to get home on the weekend and how to get back in time. If you don't have something like the transition guidelines I'm handing out feel free to modify these for your own situation.

Appendix A

Initiating Coping Skills

- Seek Information and Support
- Taking Problem-Solving Action
- Identifying Alternative Rewards

Appendix B

Questions to Ask in the Classroom

- What am I doing here?
- Why have I chosen to be sitting here now?
- Is there some better place I could be?
- What does my presence here mean to me?

Author Note

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Sharon Yazak presented sections Introduction and Recommendations for Transition and Self-Advocacy; Daniel Steere presented section Transition, Self-Advocacy, and Empowerment; Daniel Yazak presented section Transition and Self-Advocacy for the Higher Education Classroom.

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